

Sinclair Broadcasting's decision to force their stations to air an anti-Kerry documentary days before the election is a clear example of the dangers of media consolidation.

Sinclair uses the public airwaves free of charge, and is obligated by law to serve the public interest. But when large companies control the airwaves, we get more of what's good for their bottom line and less of the balanced reporting we need for our democracy. The current campaign has been in full swing for months; therefore, airing such a one-sided piece so close to the election is propagandizing rather than news reporting.

Where have these stations been in giving free air time for candidates to introduce themselves to the public? Is not this a just requirement to be placed as a condition on a license to broadcast? Our Democracy rests on an informed public -- commercial interests that operate and support broadcasting threaten to filter out and bias the crucial flow of information to the American people. Requiring broadcasters to offer free air time to candidates with significant standing in the polls would enable the broadcaster to disavow the message to their advertisers and support balanced discourse. Conversely, I see no limit on broadcasters circumventing the campaign finance rules by airing whatever propaganda they see fit and calling it "news" or a "documentary." Specifically, if Sinclair Broadcasting airs their anti-Kerry "documentary," then they should be required to air the film "Up River" as well.

Better would be to keep both from the airwaves and establish standards for what qualifies as "news" versus scripted presentations avoiding all controversial issues (because this might offend viewers and cost advertising revenue). Best, would be to forbid television and radio stations from exercising editorial control over news broadcasting - placing them in a "common carrier" model. For example, major news producers, independent from the station's ownership, could compete during a busy season of the year and public comment plus audience share would pick the one to provide news for the rest of the year. Such an arrangement would free news producers from the inevitable bias and filtering arising from station owners worried about offending advertisers or their own political views.

It is also important that we see real people from our own communities, a diversity of opinions from organizations without large advertising budgets, and more substantive and balanced news about issues that matter.

Sinclair's actions show why we need to strengthen media ownership rules, not weaken them. They show why the license renewal process needs to involve more than a returned postcard. Thank you.